

# Eight

**November 23, 2036**

A diminutive, diminished figure, in a full-length, black dress ambled its way through the labyrinth of newly constructed high-rises. Every building was void of windows or access points for at least one hundred feet before the first floor of windows appeared, making them look like half buried glow sticks.

The quirky architectural design explained why there were no efforts towards beautification at street level. There were no sidewalks or street lights. Everywhere Diana looked there were haphazard dirt paths which were void of all distinctive markings—the buildings' design helped perpetuate the concept of a border.

With her knotted hands gripping her cane tightly, Diana closed her eyes and slowly worked to straighten her back, at least as much as her osteoporosis diseased bones would allow. Then, with deliberate determination she began to raise her head towards the sky, fighting the pain from her arthritic knuckles to her back and neck, forcing them into a position they seemed adamantly set against taking.

When her body would contort no further, she opened her eyes to the intricate, interconnected arteries of brightly lit

passageways and structures resembling the futuristic Martian cities of her childhood—only this was San Francisco and it was pregnant with human life.

Shaky and short of breath from her efforts, she released her body and allowed it to curve back to its deformed state. While in the midst of reorienting herself, she realized that what she was hearing was something other than her own wheezing—a car of some sort.

With her heart in a full gallop, she surveyed her surroundings for somewhere to hide. If she were younger, or healthier, she could have run around the base of the buildings, dodging and ducking from one to the other until the car and its unknown passengers were out of sight again. But in her given state, she saw no other option but to try and blend in with the darkness.

Pushing her crippled body to hobble faster she found herself out of breath and dizzy by the time she reached the base of the nearest building. By then, the jeep's lights could be seen weaving in and out of view in the distance. Exhausted, she leaned against the sleek, gray metal base and allowed herself to slide down to the floor. In the process, her tired, aching legs slid out from under her and she squarely plopped onto the hard, dirt floor feeling the impact reverberate all the way up to her head.

Hoping she hadn't broken a hipbone, she lay all the way down on the hard ground, feeling the cool dirt against her sweaty cheek and matted dress.

Heavy, like a warm blanket, she felt the humid, stagnant air lay upon her, pinning her down, as a long suppressed memory from her past wiggled and slithered its way out.

As her breathing calmed, a strange, yet familiar sound from her past entered her thoughts.

From nowhere, a long, soothing violin note came forth, calming her fears. It started as a whisper in her ear, soft and silky, subduing the present, until it teased out the image of a young Diana, sitting before a mirror, practicing for her upcoming recital.

In the reflection, at the opposite end of their modest living room, she saw her mother in a rich, crimson, silk blouse that warmed her ebony skin. She had been at her desk adding the finishing touches to her closing argument for the lawsuit her organization had brought against an international consortium that wanted to drill in the Amazon.

As Diana watched her younger self in the mirror, she marveled at her once long, slender fingers as they danced atop the violin's sensuous neck while her bow playfully coaxed the strings into song—she had been so young and so naïve.

The humid, stagnant air of the Amazonian summer night carried in the sound of the chirping crickets, mosquitos buzzing, and a jeep that abruptly stopped in front of their gated home. Everything died after that. Her dreams. Her soul. And her sweet, beautiful, and caring mother.

The armed men forced their way into her home and destroyed the silence and sanctity of her world. They took absolutely everything from her and left her at death's door.

As her strength and will to live were depleting from her, she watched, through bloody blurry vision, as a man picked up her precious violin and smashed it against her dead mother's head. Then, as if to expel one final demon, he turned his attention to her and kicked her little head before crushing her delicate fingers under his big black military boot. Thankfully, her body had already gone into shock and become numb.

Strangely, as her world faded and went dark, and her warm, sticky blood was dripping and mixing with the men's residual fluids and sweat, all she could think about, or feel, was how heavy the hot, stagnant air had become—just like tonight.

“Ma’am?”

Diana was lost in her past.

“Ma’am?”

A hand touched her shoulder and she jumped away and screamed.

Both men put their hands up in the air and took a step back.

“Oh, great. Another one.” The young, twenty-something, Zarant guard said to the fifty-something-year-old-man named Fred.

Fred ignored his bothered comment and went on to do his job.

“Ma’am, can I see your resident papers?”

Papers? She had none. She wasn't a resident, she was with Lazador, and if they somehow found out they would most certainly take her and torture her. She wasn't even supposed to have been there at all. It was Clarence who was supposed to be there, meeting with Yesenia.

This wasn't supposed to have happened. Unsure of how to respond, she fell into the old, senile stereotype, becoming a helpless, dazed and confused senior citizen.

After waiting patiently for a response, they realized they weren't ever going to get one. Curious, Fred waived his hand before her eyes to see if she was cognizant; meanwhile, Tom, the younger one, held a square object near the right side of her head.

"Ma'am, do you know if you have a Neurochip implanted?" It was a rhetorical question. A look at his handheld gadget confirmed what he had already guessed. "Nope, not chipped." Taking a step back and sizing her up, he said, "Fred, I don't think she's one of ours. Look at her, she seems catatonic...and her clothes. She's another one of those holdout rebels who finally realized she can't survive out there on her own. She's probably so far mentally gone that she doesn't realize they're not letting vagabonds in anymore. That gravy train has left the station." He was nudging her skirt with his boot. If it hadn't been so dark they would have seen that she was shaking from head to toe. "Let's save everyone the time and money and just take her to lockup." He said, brusquely taking her hand to force

her up and then just as quickly letting it go in response to the feeling of her mangled, snarled fingers in his.

Fred glimpsed her disfigured hand and shook his head, feeling sorry for her.

“Her family must have left her here to die. No way she got here on her own. She’s a resident. I’m sure of it.” He looked around for footprints, but it was too dark.

Encounters like this one were becoming a far too common occurrence as far as Fred was concerned. Families that could no longer sustain their ailing parents were said to be putting them out for the sun to take. It was tragic and cited as one of the factors that contributed to the curtailing of the once common nightly excursions out of the SunSafes.

“It doesn’t matter. No one is supposed to be out here. We still have to lock her up.” This time he took her by the arm and forced her up, onto her feet.

His ruff manner caused her to wail from the pain. Fred stepped in and took his hand off Diana’s arm.

“Look. Let’s just leave her here. The sun or the heat will take her before nine o’clock in the morning.”

Tom wasn’t so sure. According to Zarant’s security manual, they were to lock every trespasser up.

“Tom, listen, if we arrest her, all that’s going to happen is she’s going to sit in some cell for a couple of days until enough of them are collected and then they’re going to load them all up into a bus and dump them in the middle of nowhere with no food or water. Either way you’ll get the same result, only we

will save her the misery and pain of sleeping a few nights on a cold cell floor. Look at her, she can't talk, I doubt she can walk, and she has no belongings. She's a family discard." He shook his head. "I doubt they'd claim her if we arrested her. Please, I can't take another one of these on my conscience. This way, it's the family that put her here."

"Fine, but you'll need to come get the body tomorrow night. I don't want to get reprimanded if it's found and it looks like we didn't do our job."

"Deal." Fred replied, no longer shocked at the callousness of his partner. He wouldn't be surprised if one day Tom put his own mother out here to die.

"What are you doing?" Tom asked.

Fred was in the process of taking a picture of the old woman.

"I'm going to run her through facial recognition when we get back and then I'm going to have a word with her family. The least they can do is give her a proper burial after tomorrow."

There was a time, a few years back, when Fred used to confront the families and even arrest them for abandonment, but then he realized that they were already torturing themselves enough with guilt. Eventually he realized that they wouldn't have done it if they had any other option.

Tom shook his head and walked off towards the jeep.

"You're too soft inside for this job, Fred."

Fred didn't reply. Most of their co-workers felt just as he did. Tom was the one that was the outlier. It had to be that way. Otherwise, they were all doomed.

The two men finally drove off, their conversation and the sound of their engine growing more distant with every second.

"Oh, that was scary for both of us." Yesenia said, materializing from nowhere. She had watched the entire exchange from the base of the other building. "I am so sorry. We have to change our procedure. I don't know what I could have done for you had you been taken. Follow me." They were both visibly shaken as Yesenia opened a door that blended seamlessly with the building's base. "According to the logs, the patrols were to have been completed over an hour ago. Something must have occurred." They embraced for a moment. "I usually meet with Jim. Is everything okay?"

Diana nodded. "With the nest, yes. But something terrible has happened." She was still reeling from her memory relapse and had to speak slowly until she could focus on her task again. "There was an off grid community in Mount Shasta that Zarant gassed this afternoon. Like all of us who survive outside of the SunSafes, they're nocturnal so Gary is worried that they've all been murdered. It will all depend on how interconnected their nest was and what precautions they took. He, Jim, and Michelle transported over a couple of hours ago to look for survivors. Clarence needed to stay back and help carry the survivors from the transport into the nest, so that only left me."



Yesenia wiped her forehead and paced back and forth.  
“Wait. Are you sure? Mount Shasta?”

Diana nodded.

“I told Steven this was going to happen.”

Diana could see that something was on her mind.

“Yesenia, is something wrong?”

She didn’t reply for a moment. Her hair was tied back in a ponytail, giving her big brown eyes precedence. They were visibly moist.

“It wasn’t an off grid community, not exactly. It was a community of homes that were interconnected by tunnels that went from basement to basement, but they never hid their existence. They dug in about the same time we did and flipped their days like we did and became nocturnal. And they kept on. Then the owner of the big local employer died and the other sold and moved into the SunSafe. That was about when all of this construction for the SunSafe was happening and the multinationals were buying up cement, lumber, and metal. Anyway, a multinational moved in and automated everything. People there were bitter but stayed put. After that, the only jobs they had left were as cashiers and fast food servers, but then that too was automated and people suddenly had no money. The city went bankrupt and all city utilities were shut off. So they became a self-sufficient community. They even built their own sewage treatment plant that uses solar and hydro power. But with climate change, their animals and crops kept dying to

the point where they could no longer sustain their numbers. So they organized and mobilized protests.”

Diana nodded her head, recalling Gary’s conversation with Clarence about the population. He knew they had drawn Zachary’s wrath when they had successfully organized and publicly shamed the government for allowing the multinationals to agglomerate and automate the economy to the point where the need for human labor had become obsolete.

“They made too much noise.”

Yesenia nodded. “Steven’s family is in that group. Oh my God, I need to call Steven.”

Diana took Yesenia by the hands to calm her down.

“Let Gary talk to him. Remember, he’s there right now. On the ground.”

Yesenia took a deep breath. Diana was right. Gary would know what to say and he would have all of the facts.

“So, just to be sure, there is no chance that Steven was in that Shasta community with his parents when this all took place?”

Yesenia shook her head. “None, he’s in Russia, which is why you are here. We found Kenneth and the respiration technology.”

Diana tilted her head quizzically. “After missing for so many years, he is still alive?”

“Barely. This is why I didn’t want to risk using the radio. Steven found him through one of his sources. He’s been in hiding, staying with different people meanwhile trying to fix

the kinks in his respiration technology. You see, Zachary is now mandating that all employees have a Neurochip embedded, essentially cutting off his helpline. As it happens, a few years back Steven worked with one of Kenneth's closest friends and he had mentioned that he was going off grid. That friend remembered the conversation and sought him out for help."

"So he's in Russia?"

"In hiding. We're working out a way to transport him here without him being detected."

"There's a transport in Madera that was installed a few years back. Why not transport him there directly?"

Yesenia shook her head.

"He's ill. He needs to come see a doctor friend of ours who can give him a round of radiation therapy to try and shrink a brain tumor that's plaguing him before he goes to you. Neither he nor us want to take the risk of transporting him after that."

Diana nodded. "Gary will be beside himself when I tell him all of this. He might not believe me."

"I couldn't believe it. What luck!"

Diana reached into her cleavage and brought out an old fashioned cell phone, which she promptly placed in Yesenia's hand. "This is for you, from Gary. He's on speed dial one. In order to use it, you have to place your right eye right here. That's the only way it will power on." Diana placed a curved, knotted finger over what Yesenia thought was the microphone. "Otherwise, it remains powered off and will wipe itself if

anyone tries to force it on.” She grinned. “I’m on speed dial two.”

“Oh, what a relief!” Yesenia exhaled. “The last one finally gave out and I felt so excommunicated. It was the worst feeling in the world.” She looked at her watch. “We’re running out of time and I have quite a bit more to tell you. As of January all SunSafe members will be required to have Neurochips embedded in them. The Neurochips will record everything we see and do, but they cannot access our thoughts as originally claimed.” Diana had a quizzical look on her face, but Yesenia was too short on time to explain. “Gary knows what they are, he stole the specs from the German developer for our government...or Zarant, as he later discovered. Anyway, soon we will also be required to have a GPS tracker installed in our wrist to go with the Neurochip. We need to know how to get around this technology within the next couple of weeks. Primarily, is there a way to temporarily untether it without it alerting anyone? I’m sure Gary knows how they work or he at least knows the person with the answers.”

Diana stood, nodding to let her know she was getting it all.

“I hesitate to admit it, but Gary was absolutely right. It sounds like we’re moving towards one hundred percent cloned meat. Also, Soul-Bio is moving away from vertical farming and turning to seaweed. They say its lack of resources, but we know it’s a profit thing. Besides, they know we have no other alternatives, every SunSafe on the planet is under Zarant’s control.”

“What is your government doing about it?”

“They’ve agreed to look the other way if they begin paying monthly stipends to the unemployed masses. It’s win-win for the multinationals. They say they’ll pay the stipend but in reality we are the ones paying for it every time they cut a corner to cut costs. Fresh vegetables and meat are being replaced with God only knows what. We’re drinking recycled water. Nothing is real anymore. Everything is synthetic, manufactured by a machine of one of the nine remaining multinationals. They are even going to begin outlawing nightly excursions outside of the SunSafe. So our visits will become even more complicated to arrange.”

She embraced Diana gently, as if she were afraid to break her. “I’m ranting. I’m sorry. You have to go”

“Yesenia, perhaps it’s time to come back to the nest. We can deal with Marco.”

Yesenia had a longing look about her. But she couldn’t go, not without her son who she was sure was still alive.

“Perhaps soon. But for now, we are out of time. The young lady who will be here in a few minutes will take you to a safe house in the East Bay where you’ll stay until tomorrow at dusk. From there, someone you know from the nest will pick you up. Because no one can know who I am I must leave now.” She had tears in her eyes as she gave Diana another quick hug. “I miss you.”